The Challenge of Finding (And Affording) Good Computer Help:

Look to the Younger Generation!

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It's no surprise to librarians that the libraries we run have become increasingly complicated with large computer/automated systems. Though the technical requirements to run a library in this computer age have rapidly changed, the human and financial resources required don't always match up quickly enough. Hiring, training and maintaining competent computer staff presents an ongoing challenge. Library salaries often are not competitive with private industry, yet the level of sophistication and size of the computing facilities of libraries are the same.

The computer system is not the only problem: according to an article in the May/June 1999 issue of *Public Libraries*, "Americans identify as 'very important' that libraries provide a place where people can receive help in using computers and online resources." The August 1996 issue of *Library Journal* noted that "providing technical support when things don't work may be even more important than the equipment itself. Help has to be both competent and timely, whether it is provided on-site or as a part of a service contract." What, then, is the answer?

Recent library school graduates often demonstrate a better knowledge of computer technology but attracting them is difficult in the low-wage library world. Graduates are drawn to private industry for the same reasons that computer science graduates are—better salaries. Librarians whose degrees predate computers may have picked up on-the-job training, but they realistically may not be able to handle complex computer networks. They can't act as computer technician, systems analyst, network administrator, database developer, and webmaster and perform a librarian's duties in reference, collection development, and events programming, as well.

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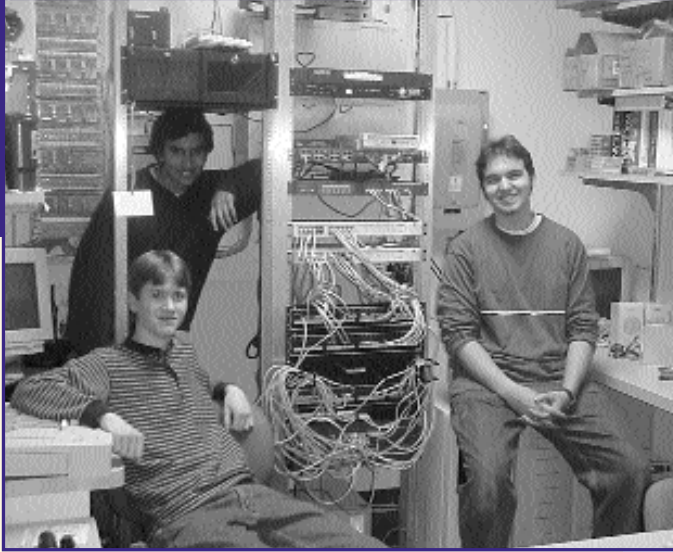
There are ways to cope. The Brighton District Library has been able to meet the demands for technology (we have over 55 computers) and support that our patrons identified as "very important." Our primary success has come from tapping into the abilities of our high school students. Since 1996, when we moved into a new facility with a large computer technology offering, we successfully found, cultivated and maintained good technical help from within our community.

Student help is not a panacea. It comes with its own set of problems, but we have been able to minimize and manage the inconveniences and exploit the benefits—competent technical support at an affordable price. Two high school students are employed by the library at a competitive hourly rate, given schedule flexibility, asked to assume progressive responsibility as their expertise and maturity permits, and are given an opportunity to expand their technical skills.

The emphasis is on "expand their technical skills" because you cannot expect to hire a high school student who is capable of walking into your library and managing your library's computer system. You must first find someone with basic computer skills and the other attributes that make up a good employee. Don't go looking for Bill Gates, Jr., expecting for a level of expertise and range that is so unrealistic that you will scare away candidates who carefully consider a job's requirements. Determine what your primary and most critical need is, target it, and then look for basic skills and the ability to learn.

A key trigger I use is how much the high school candidates tinker at home. Most of our student employees have usually torn apart a computer at home and built one or more themselves. They understand the guts of the hardware, know something about software, maybe not a lot about networking but some, and they have a passion for computers—this kind of a job is like playing to them. They also must be able to communicate, assist and interact with library staff and the public. Another major skill your computer candidate needs is the ability to work responsibly on his/her own, without a lot of direct supervision. This can be a tall order for some high school students. They aren't used to it and may not be mature enough to assume it or abuse it. The good news is that I've worked with seven students since 1996 and only one wasn't able to work independently.

How do you find students? The best way is to approach your local high

school and contact the technology department. The teacher will be able to tell you who are the best students. You can also advertise through the high school newspaper and/or in local computer stores. Once you've hired your first students and created an exciting and rewarding work environment for them, word gets around that this is a great job. You probably won't have to advertise or do much searching in the future because the students will be coming to you.

I prefer to hire students who are in their sophomore or junior years—the turnover is low and I can count on them for 2-3 years. I also try to "stagger" my staff so that I don't have only senior students and then face training an entirely new staff when they graduate. The seniors can also train the newcomers throughout the year before they leave. I hire during the spring or mid-summer, before my seniors graduate and leave, so there is some opportunity for overlap and training.

I provide a concise, detailed job description. We also organize our system of reporting computer problems so that work direction is automatic. Staff complete a Computer Problem Report; when a student walks in the door, the job sheets are ready to go. Our students normally work after school for 3-5 hours during the week and rotate coverage on Saturdays.

For big things, such as upgrades and expansions, I still use my students but I turn to my seasoned employees (those who have graduated and are in college pursuing degrees in computer science). I plan this kind of work to coincide around semester breaks and hire my former employees to help with the work. It's a win-win situation: they have some well-paid work for a short period of time. I have someone who knows my system and whose work I trust.

Another unique arrangement we use is to hire one of our college students for a full-time summer job. We arrange with three other libraries in our area to jointly hire this person, with the Brighton District Library as the employer of record. The college student acts as a computer circuit rider and works at the participating libraries one or two days a week, depending on how much time s/he contracts for. This arrangement is quite successful: we are able to keep someone who is especially well-qualified; we maintain stable, experienced help; and we make sure that we plan and execute changes and improvements to our computer system in a timely, consistent manner.
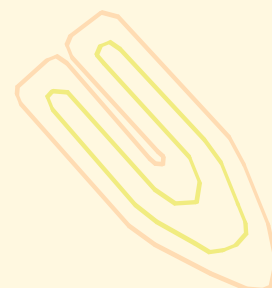
Libraries will always need to have someone on staff to over-see their computer systems. The use of students at the Brighton District Library has meant that we have good, reasonably priced technical help and we can keep up with the growing technology needs of our libraries and our patrons. We are able to do this and still allow our librarians to be librarians. Someone on the staff still needs some computer knowledge to be the point-person to supervise, plan and manage the big picture.

There are additional ways to manage as well. Make sure that all library staff is trained in basic computer skills. Usually one or two staff members know "a little something" about comput-ers. They can always be of help but use them sparingly and wisely. We have also created and consulted with our Technology Advisory Committee, which is a part of our board of trustees. These are community members who work in the computer industry, lend their expertise to the library and keep us abreast of technology trends. Our local computer users group has also been one of our best partners. Group members have taught introductory Internet classes to the public at our library since 1996. Classes are offered twice a month, except during the sum-mer months. We could not have offered this kind of long-term training if we'd used our staff. This is an important point in managing technology—make sure your public is trained, too!

Karen welcomes comments and questions. Contact her at the Brighton District Library, 100 Library Drive, Brighton, Michigan 48116, or you may email her at kkeller@brighton.lib.mi.us*. Visit the Brighton District Library website at* http://brighton.lib.mi.us

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